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SUBJECT: Government Again Warns Independent Media

REF: 09 NIAMEY 950; 09 NIAMEY 838

¶1. (U) Summary: The Conseil Superieur de la Communication (CSC), the Nigerien media regulatory body and its subsidiary advisory board, the Conseil de Presse, issued strongly worded warnings against the independent media on February 8. The Conseil de Presse recommended that three journalists from Dounia TV, Radio Anfani, and Le Canard Dechaine be suspended for three months for unprofessional and unethical conduct. This marks the end of a brief period of slightly improving media climate in Niger and raises tensions in advance of a planned media summit with the Minister of Communications/Government Spokesman later this month. End summary.

The Government Admonishes the Media

¶2. (U) The Conseil Superieur de la Communication (CSC), the Nigerien media regulatory body, issued a public general warning against the media in Niger on February 8 claiming that some media organizations have been acting unprofessionally and jeopardizing the public order. The CSC included in the press release specific allegations from the Conseil de Presse, an advisory group comprised of six journalists that reports to the CSC. While the CSC warning is broad, the Conseil de Presse (Press Council) report of February 5 deplored the actions of specific journalists and called for a three-month suspension of their press credentials. The Conseil de Presse wrote that despite calls by the CSC for the independent media to improve their performance, recent media reports have contained numerous instances of insulting and vitriolic attacks directed at institutions and individuals.

Two Newspapers Warned over Food Insecurity Coverage

¶3. (U) The Press Council criticized the independent newspapers "L'Evenement" and "L'Actualite" for what they characterized as alarmist and inaccurate reporting on the looming food insecurity situation in Niger. "L'Actualite" also received criticism for disseminating an allegedly unsubstantiated rumor of tensions between Nouhou Arzika, chairperson of the Patriotic Movement for the Defense of the People and the Nation (MPPR), and Prime Minister Ali Badjo Gamatie.

Suspension Recommended for Dounia TV, Radio Anfani, and Le Canard Dechaine Newspaper

¶4. (U) The Press Council report singled out Dounia Television, Radio Anfani, and the independent newspaper "Le Canard Dechaine"

for unethical and unprofessional conduct. Dounia TV received criticism for allowing the remarks that high-ranking members of the administration of Niger are crooks, made by a journalist with the independent newspaper "La Roue de L'Histoire" Ismael Laoual Sallaou during a televised journalism roundtable, go unchallenged. Dounia also received a reproach for insulting the President of Senegal by calling him "a sicko." The report censured Radio Anfani for allowing a guest on a January 26 program, National Assembly Deputy Sanoussi Tambari Jackou, to criticize the Prime Minister and use language likely to threaten social harmony and incite ethnic divisions. Le Canard Dechaine's Director of Publication Abdoulaye Tiemogo came under fire in the Press Council report for two articles: one from February 2 entitled "Tandja Mocks the People of Niger" and another from February 1 entitled "The Unending Folly of President Tandja's Personal Power". The report concluded with the recommendation that the CSC issue stern warnings to Dounia TV, Radio Anfani, and Le Canard Dechaine and suspend the press credentials of Abdoulaye Tiemogo, Ismael Laoual Sallaou, and Zakari Alzouma for three months. (Note: Alzouma is the Director of Publication of the independent newspaper L'Opinions; the report did not cite specific justifications for his suspension. End note.) The GON has attempted to reign in Dounia, Radio Anfani, L'Actualite (ref A) and Le Canard Dechaine (ref B) before.

Independent Media Cry Foul

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15. (U) The CSC has not yet decided on sanctions, but sent a copy of the warning letter to media organizations in addition to releasing it publicly. State-owned and operated national television station TeleSahel broadcasted the report on February 8, state radio Voix du Sahel did so on February 9, and state daily newspaper Le Sahel printed it on February 10. Ousmane Toudou, managing director of Radio Anfani, expressed his surprise and indignation during a February 8 newscast and said he would appeal any sanctions. He also claimed that the Press Council violated regulations by sending its report directly to the CSC without consulting or advising the accused media organizations. The chairperson of the ANEPI, the National Association of Independent Press Editors, said on several private radio stations that this step "reveals the illegitimacy of the CSC." Privately, several journalists shared their disapproval of the Press Council's actions with post, saying that the CSC is trying to choke the independent media.

The Press Council

16. (U) The Press Council is a body of six press representatives appointed by the CSC in an advisory capacity. The current Council is composed of: Harouna Niandou, President of the Council and independent journalist; Illa Kane, Director of Publication of the independent but pro-government newspaper "La Griffé"; Abdoulaye Issaka, freelance journalist and media consultant; Aboubacar Kiassa and Habou Hadi, journalists with state radio Voix du Sahel; and Fatouma Ide, journalist with the state newspaper organization ONEP. Several journalists have told post that the Press Council is pro-government and is not representative of the private media.

The End of a Warming Trend

17. (U) The CSC and Press Council report put an end to a short period of slightly improving press freedoms. The Public Affairs Section held a series of lunches and visits with independent media in Niamey and in the interior of the country (Dosso, Maradi, and

Zinder) over the last two weeks. The journalists consistently opined that government intervention has eased somewhat in the last few months due to the EU's insistence on press freedoms during meetings in Brussels in December 2009, the ongoing ECOWAS mediated Inter-Nigerien Political Dialogue, and consistent pressure from the international community, particularly the USG. The Director of Publications for the independent newspaper "Le Republicain" told the PAO that during a recent meeting of media organizations, the media association singled out the U.S. Embassy as the primary supporter and defender of press freedom in Niger through workshops, public statements, and financial support.

¶8. (SBU) The journalists stressed that despite the recent warming trend, not long ago they were subject to harassment and intimidation, including direct threatening phone calls from the CSC to avoid granting coverage to the Opposition during the run-up to the referendum and local elections. One publisher of a major independent newspaper told the PAO, "There is still no press freedom in Niger. We all know where the line is and that we are not to cross it."

Min. of Comm's Conference on the State of the Media

¶9. (U) Another sign of formerly improving relations between the media and the GON was the Minister of Communication and Government Spokesman Kassoum Moctar's plan to convene media organizations to assess their needs and discuss ways to support them. During the first meeting with major media organizations on December 29, 2009, Moctar said he would hold a general meeting with media representatives and the CSC to discuss the recreation of the Maison de la Presse, government grants to support the independent media, and decriminalization of media infractions. He also said he wanted to hold a "Media Evening" to celebrate the role of the media in

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Niger.

Maison de la Presse

¶10. (U) The GON established the Maison de la Presse in 2005 after the Francophonie games as a center for conferences, training, internet access, and filing stories. The GON donated the building and equipment, and the media association paid for salaries, utilities, and supplies. The GON closed it in June 2008 after accusing the international community of subverting it to influence the independent media and criticize the GON. Independent journalists are eager for its re-establishment.

GON Financial Support for the Press

¶11. (U) The "fond d'aide a la presse" is an annual GON grant to support independent media. The previous amount was 200,000,000 CFA (approximately 417,000 USD), distributed to independent print and broadcast media via the CSC, which controversially kept 70,000,000 CFA (approximately 146,000 USD) for "training for community radio and training the trainers." Post's contacts in the independent media say that they have requested that the CSC not control this fund. In mid-2008, the GON accused former Prime Minister Hama Amadou of embezzling 100,000,000 CFA (approximately 208,000 USD) from this account, granted in 2001.

Decriminalization of the Press

¶12. (U) The "depenelisation du delit de presse" stems from a campaign pledge of former Prime Minister Hama Amadou in 2004 to decriminalize inadvertent reporting errors and enhance protection for journalists in cases of accusations of slander and libel. The independent media has decided to push for this stalled legislation again, and the Minister of Communication and Government Spokesman has said he would revisit the idea.

Comment

¶13. (U) The recent lessening of restrictions on the independent media appears to have been a false start. Unwilling to garner negative international attention during the Inter-Nigerien Political Dialogue, the GON appeared to relax its prior campaign of harassment and intimidation, with a resulting noticeable uptick in stories critical of the Government. Increasing coverage of a serious deficit of food resources, however, appears to have hit a nerve and the Government has decided once again to intervene and control the media. The targets of the Press Council report, representing independent radio, television, and newspapers, appear carefully chosen to send a warning signal to all independent media. This step will raise tensions and make the upcoming meeting with the Minister of Communication and Government Spokesman even more pivotal. End comment.

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